

What's It All About, Eberhard?



If you have read *D.U.*, followed this blog, or even just been subjected to my teaching for any length of time, you've no doubt noticed certain themes bubble up again and again. In the great wide world of dressage instruction you've got your bio mechanists, your "position-is-everything-ers," your dominators, Dressage-*Lite* proselytizers, and practitioners of at least a zillion more flavors of training. I'm a "Form Follows Function" guy. I urge my students never to lose sight of the basic question—what did we come here to do in the first place? Robert Dover once defined our task as "behavior modification and body building." Believe me, if you've set out to do either of those things with a thousand pound (or sixteen hundred pound) animal, you had better figure out how to maximize your communication skills or you'll be talking to a brick warmblood!

Along these lines, I met a new student in Costa Rica—an American travel writer living there and employed by a website whose clientele is comprised of U.S. citizens shopping for vacation opportunities.

Her horse, a former jumper, was pleasant enough, i.e. not likely to cause her serious injury, but when asked to show me what she'd been working on, she rode him around in total passivity—no energy, no meaningful contact, no attempt to produce any kind of frame or balance. Alfie, you see, had ridden (equitation) as a child, then, prior to acquiring this new horse, had been away from the sport for fourteen years.

Helping a rider identify her priorities—what to be thinking and what to be doing—is always a big part of every instructor's job. The problem is further complicated when we face a rider who's new to us, and she arrives with her own baggage and a pre-conceived vision of what she should be about.

Over the years I have discovered that to blurt out, "Oh, my god! What in the world are you doing? Ride him on the aids!" doesn't usually send a new student rushing back for more lessons. Nor does shredding her dignity and self esteem by pounding her in the first five minutes with a recitation of all the things she's doing wrong.

As much as I always want to "get something accomplished" in the limited time I have, I try to let things develop gradually. Over the hour the student and I can find our way to a solution that helps her go away with an insight into the scheme she should follow in her training. So in this case I opted to try a mechanical approach: "feel a heavier contact," "push him into a more alive connection," "get him coming off your inside leg more promptly," but nothing changed very much.

When a rider is passive to begin with and has grown up in a tradition of keeping the aids invisible (whether she's doing anything or not) and of avoiding getting scolded rather than discovering ways to be creative, the challenge is obvious. It's all about changing her goals.

So we took a "study break" and conferred in arena center.

"Alfie, tell me what you're thinking while you're riding," I proposed.

"Well," she offered rather tentatively, "I'm thinking of keeping my wrists 'like this.' I'm trying to keep the rhythm of my posting steady, and I'm trying to keep my weight down in my heels and not lean forward from my hips."

Her answer didn't surprise me at all. But how to get her to re-prioritize and see things differently?

Keeping her "other life" in mind, I suggested this scenario:

"Imagine you've gone off to survey a new resort... you've tried all the amenities.... you've sampled each of the main dishes at the restaurant.... and you've gone home to write it up for the website. You're sitting at home on your deck by the pool, and forsaking your laptop, you're writing up your review on an old fashioned, lined tablet with a pencil in your hand. And I interrupt and say to you, 'tell me what you're thinking about.'

"If you answer *I'm thinking about holding the pencil just so between my thumb and my index finger, keeping the proper angle but not putting too much pressure on the point*, then it's OK to address your riding that way, too!

"But you're in the business of communicating, and that's the essence of how we try to ride as well. If that isn't your focus, if all the window dressings and mechanical details aren't designed to facilitate that one over-arching goal, then all those efforts won't amount to anything in the long run!"

I'm happy to say that Alf caught the drift of my message, and she began to really Ride. By focusing on *what she was saying to her horse*, in the span of two days she was able to establish a contact, start to shape his topline, and make use of his potential. She's still near the beginning of the road, and yes, she should check in on her wrists and her heels and her hip angle periodically. But now she has found a thread of interaction to explore between her horse and herself, step by step, second by second. That relationship is what will make her riding less rote and end up producing real dressage results as she goes on.